Travelling ‘Home’ To A Strange Place

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Abstract

In both her fiction and autobiographical essays Lily Brett describes the process of travelling ‘home’ to Poland as an adult child of Holocaust survivors. Brett’s own journey, and the journey’s back to Poland in her narratives are not unique but rather symptomatic of a larger journey of return. However, a return to Poland for the children of survivors does not assure a sense of completion nor a reconciling – Brett’s writing attests to this. Instead, the return continues to create a sense of ambivalence and a further acknowledgement of loss and dislocation. Given the enormity of Brett’s own family’s loss, which she writes about in her autobiographical essays and her highly autobiographical fiction, to expect a resolution through returning to Poland is to undervalue the enormity of this dislocation. However, while no resolution can be easily attained, Poland still continues to be a site for ‘working through’ these very personal, and political memories, and thus continues to be a site for negotiating Jewish identities linked to the Holocaust.

In a close reading of her latest novel Too Many Men I will discuss the contemporary concern with returning to the past for a sense of contemporary ‘self.’ For many children of survivors (but not all) a return to the past not only involves remembering, researching and imagining, but may also involve a literal return to the parent’s country of origin and to the places of incarceration and trauma. Too Many Men sees the protagonist Ruth, journeying to Poland with her father, visiting the sites of his former life and the places of his family’s death and historical destruction. In discussing this journey of return, I will analyse the different meanings of place for a survivor and a survivor’s child. Sites of memory and the ‘trace’ are key ideas I will adopt in this reading.